

Bill would help prevent bullying and harassment in schools, combat growing drop-out rate

Washington, DC - Rep. Linda Sánchez (D-CA), Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), and Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY), introduced legislation today that would equip schools with the resources they need to prevent school bullying and harassment. The Safe Schools Improvement Act would promote a safe learning environment and reduce the nation's growing drop-out rate.

"It is time we combat outdated and erroneous beliefs that downplay the seriousness of bullying," said Rep. Linda Sánchez. "Bullying is not a harmless 'rite of passage' and can no longer be brushed off as child's play. Unlike child's play, victims of bullying do not choose to participate, and rather than build character, bullying can cause children to become anxious, fearful, unhappy, and even cause them to be physically sick.

"Schools may not always have the resources to train teachers to spot and prevent harmful bullying and this bill will allow them to use funds for proper training," continued Sánchez. "Three-quarters of all school shooting incidents have been linked to bullying and harassment, and victims of bullying and harassment are more likely to be depressed or suicidal."

"Schools must provide a safe environment where our children can learn and grow up free of harassment and bullying and this legislation's goals are to provide that very environment," said Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. "The bill would require schools that receive funding from the Safe Drug Free and Communities Act to implement an anti bullying policy that protects students from bullying and includes protections based on sexual orientation, among other categories.

"These past few months have seen cruel stories on national television of young children taking their own lives because they could no longer live with the scorn and shame heaped on them at school by other children, causing much justifiable indignation in the communities affected," continued Ros-Lehtinen. "I urge my colleagues to pass this bill and help the countless children all across our nation who would consider taking their own lives rather than face another day at school. This is not what schools were intended for."

"Schools should be safe places where children can learn and grow, but far too often we hear about cruel acts of bullying and violence that can make schools dangerous and painful environments," said Rep. Carolyn McCarthy. "The emotional and physical impacts of bullying have become more severe than ever and we as parents need to be proactive in dealing with this serious problem. This legislation is an important step in the right direction of bringing attention to the serious problem of bullying among our nation's youth. I believe that this is a serious issue that merits the attention of Congress and I look forward to hearings and legislative action."

Research has shown that bullying and harassment are serious problems that impede students' academic progress and overall mental health. Studies have found that nearly one-third of all students are bullied at least once a month and that one out of every ten high school drop-outs left school because of repeated bullying. Recently, Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, of Massachusetts and Jaheem Herrera, of Georgia, both 11, killed themselves in separate incidents as a result of repeated and prolonged bullying. This bill will help teachers and schools

address and stop the bullying before more tragedies like this occur.

The Safe Schools Improvement Act would amend the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act to include specific provisions to prevent bullying and harassment. It would require states and districts to include information regarding the prevalence of bullying and harassment in schools as part of the needs assessments they are already required to complete. Inclusion of this data will help ensure that schools and districts are properly equipped to handle bullying and harassment. In addition, the Safe Schools Improvement Act would require every school to include policies to address bullying and harassment in their codes of conduct.

This bill, which the sponsors hope will be included as part of legislation to reauthorize and improve the No Child Left Behind Act, also defines the terms “bullying” and “harassment” to include them in the broad definition of school violence and to ensure that all children, regardless of actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, receive protection from bullying.

A broad range of educational and non-educational organizations have expressed support for the Safe Schools Improvement Act, including the American Library Association; the National PTA; the American Federation of Teachers; Big Brothers Big Sisters of America; the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network; the National Council of La Raza; and the Human Rights Campaign.